Inequalities: when culture becomes a capital

Laurie Hanquinet

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edited by Dave O’Brien, Toby Miller, Victoria Durrer

Don’t quote without permission: laurie.hanquinet@york.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Since Bourdieu’s famous ‘Distinction’, much has been written on the role of cultural resources or capital in the (re-)production of inequalities. Yet, what exactly cultural capital means, and especially under its embodied forms, has been subject to diverse and possibly contradictory interpretations. This chapter provides an overview of different conceptualizations of the cultural capital and the associated approach to socio-cultural divisions. Drawing on empirical studies from different countries, the chapter pays particular attention to the now well-established figure of the Cultural Omnivore (Peterson) but also to the idea of ‘emerging forms of cultural capital’ (Prieur & Savage), as they both point out new ways to create social distance. The chapter examines their possible implications for cultural policies and more specifically initiatives in favour of cultural democratization but also of cultural democracy.
Introduction

Since Bourdieu’s famous ‘Distinction’ (1984), much has been written on the role of cultural resources or ‘cultural capital’ in the production and reproduction of social inequalities. Yet, over the years, cultural capital has been used in many ways and associated with quite different meanings. As a consequence, what exactly cultural capital means, especially its ‘embodied’ forms, has been subject to diverse and possibly contradictory interpretations. This chapter represents an exploration into the origins and the developments of the concept in Bourdieu’s work and an assessment of its validity and relevance in today’s context that has been characterized as ‘omnivorous’ (Peterson & Simkus 1992).

I will particularly assess the extent to which the idea of highbrow culture¹ is central to the definition and operationalization of cultural capital. I will show that relying on the notion of embodied cultural capital without acknowledging the links with highbrow culture empties the concept of its meaning as this is precisely the link that defines the value of people’s cultural resources. To do this, I will argue that Bourdieu’s social theory is also an aesthetic theory. This is essential to understand that the under-theorized concept of omnivorousness has never actually challenged the mechanisms of cultural distinction and legitimacy but has instead helped us reconsider the ways we thought they operated in the society. Three main lines of arguments are presented in this chapter: first, omnivorous patterns need the maintaining of cultural hierarchies rather than their collapse to emerge; second, they draw on hierarchies not only between but also within genres; and, third, they are embedded within distinctive discourses of openness. This reinforces the need to look at the composition of cultural capital and how it has undergone some reconfigurations to integrate ‘emerging’ forms of cultural distinction. At the end of paper, I will reflect on the possible implications of these sociological findings for cultural policies and more specifically initiatives in favour of cultural democratization and cultural democracy.

¹ Note that ‘highbrow culture’ and ‘high culture’ are used in an interchangeable way in this chapter. The same holds for ‘low’ and ‘lowbrow’. Indeed, although highbrow may arguably refer to the attributes or abilities of those who consume these cultural forms (rather than the forms themselves), the development of the notion of highbrow is intrinsically related to the opposition between low culture and High Culture which grew stronger over the nineteenth century with the former being increasingly sacralised and the latter increasingly considered as a form of easy entertainment. This movement of sacralization led to the emergence in the US of two related adjectives: “highbrow”, derived from phrenology (“highbrowed”), appeared in the 1880s to refer to intellectual or aesthetic refinement with “lowbrow” arriving a couple of decades later, and describing the opposite (Levine, 1990).
Origins of cultural capital in the sociology of education

The notion of cultural capital has arguably been most often associated with Bourdieu’s ‘Distinction’ (1984). Yet, the notion already appears in his earlier contributions to the field of the sociology of education. In ‘The Inheritors’ (1979), Bourdieu with his colleague Passeron sought to unveil the role of school in the reproduction of inequalities and of structures of power. They demonstrated the importance of cultural skills and knowledge acquired through familial transmission on pupils’ educational achievements and in doing this, they emphasized the role of cultural differences in social stratification. Schools were supposed to be meritocratic institutions in which everyone’s own merit and abilities would be rewarded; yet, the two scholars showed instead that schools were a more comfortable place to develop oneself for the members of the dominant classes, as these institutions were built on principles valued by and disseminated within the latter.

When it comes to the exact definition given to cultural capital in ‘The Inheritors’ and the later ‘Reproduction’ (1970), two key joint works with Passeron, it remains rather vague. As Robbins (2005) points out, the concept of ‘cultural capital’ doesn’t appear in the original – French – version of ‘The Inheritors’. The authors used the terms ‘capital linguistique’, which was translated into ‘cultural capital’. I would add that, in the French version, they extensively referred to the idea of ‘cultural heritage’ (‘héritage culturel’), which acts as a capital (the word is used) composed of knowledge, skills and savoir-faire transmitted by the parents to their privileged children.

Lamont and Lareau (1988), who offered a much welcome clarification of the notion at the end of the 1980s, went through the two books to excavate a more precise meaning of the concept. According to them, in The Inheritors, cultural capital refers to

‘informal knowledge about the school, traditional humanist culture, linguistic competence and specific attitudes, or personal styles (e.g. ease, naturalness, aloofness, creativity, distinction and “brilliance”’) and

‘In Reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1970]), […] [c]ultural capital is described as including only linguistic aptitude (grammar, accent, tone), previous academic culture, formal knowledge and general culture as well as diplomas. Attitudes toward school, manners and personal style, and taste for high culture are now conceived of as class ethos rather than cultural capital.’ (Lareau & Lamont 1988: 155).
Maybe the latter observation about high culture is due to the fact that Passeron was not involved in Bourdieu’s other projects on the reception of highbrow culture (Robbins 2005) and the concept, as developed by Bourdieu and Passeron in the sociology of education, didn’t seem to include aesthetic concerns. Nonetheless, it already seemed to include diverse forms of expression, such as an embodied one (as being part of the way people act and behave).

Lareau and Weininger (2003) tackled this issue of the importance of highbrow aesthetic culture for cultural capital. They argued that, since DiMaggio’s famous article on the relations between cultural capital and educational success (1982a), cultural capital has been successively related to highbrow culture usually measured by participation in traditional highbrow activities such as going to museums without implying the possession of any ‘properly educational’ skills or abilities. On this last point, Sullivan noted that their account however mainly relied on one body of literature which focused on ‘status seeking’ processes while another part of the literature actually ‘describe[d] cultural capital in terms of educational skills, abilities and knowledge, described in such terms as “information-processing”, “cognitive abilities” and “educative resources”’ (2007, p.3). Therefore they may have exaggerated the extent to which the link between academic ability and cultural capital had been neglected but still their insistence on ability was useful to acknowledge the cognitive dimension of the habitus which translates conditions of existence into a series of dispositional skills and knowledge. Exploring this further, Sullivan discussed this possibility further and came to the conclusion that ‘[f]orms of cultural capital such as a high level of linguistic fluency, broad cultural knowledge, and a knowledge of the “rules of the game” of academic assessments are an important part of what we mean by “academic ability”’ (2007, p. 9).

Lareau and Weininger also disagreed with the repetitive use of highbrow culture participation to measure cultural capital (as visible indictors) but even more so to define it (highbrow aesthetic pursuits and attitudes as cultural capital) in educational research. What they see as an inadequate insistence on highbrow culture to grasp the role of cultural capital in education would come from the widely-cited article ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’ (1977), in which Bourdieu seemed to operationalize (but not to define) the concept by referring to measures of cultural participation. DiMaggio’s or even a more general focus on highbrow culture in the understanding of the cultural capital would originate in this article. This statement may overlook the fact that DiMaggio has also been a key player in the field of the sociology of culture for which cultural capital was part of Bourdieu’s aesthetic theory, as developed in ‘Distinction’ and already drafted in ‘The Love of art’ (Bourdieu & Darbel 1969).
Lareau and Weininger focused on the contribution of cultural capital to educational outcomes but ended up by seriously making us question the extent to which cultural capital should be associated in any case with highbrow aesthetic culture. Does cultural capital need to rely on aesthetic considerations or can we use it without them?

**Bourdieu’s definition – what is the real connexion with highbrow culture?**

Lareau and Weininger suggested that ‘cultural capital [...] allows culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next’ (2003, p.587). A purposively broad definition that takes some distance from those that associate automatically highbrow cultural participation with cultural capital. To make this move away from highbrow aesthetics, they drew on one of Bourdieu’s most concise and clear texts on his concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1979) distinguished there three different forms of capital, embodied (‘incorporé’), objectified (‘objectivé’) and institutionalized (‘institutionnalisé’). The objectified forms of cultural capital refer to material supports in which cultural capital can be expressed and transmitted, such as cultural goods (writings, paintings, etc.) or monuments. These objectified forms require the embodied capital to be fully decoded and appreciated (symbolic appropriation). It also necessitates economic capital or resources to be bought or accessed (material appropriation). Institutionalized forms of cultural capital mean degrees and diplomas which act as some sort of autonomous (legal) validation or evidence of embodied cultural capital. We can see that these two forms of cultural capital are intrinsically related with embodied capital, which is eventually ‘le nerf de la guerre’ (i.e. the key issue) between the different definitions of cultural capital. It is that, as Lareau and Weiniger noted, his explanatory text ‘contains no mention of an affinity for or participation in highbrow cultural activities’ (2003, p.579) but I would add no explicit mention to be exact. Indeed, in his text, he discussed the role of these embodied dispositions that act – in a disguised way – to enable their owners to decipher, interpret or, in more Bourdieusian terms, symbolically appropriate goods: they help, for instance, to ‘consume a painting’ (‘consommer un tableau’, 1979, p. 5).

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2 ‘Thus, the question arises whether Bourdieu considered congruity between educational norms and status practices to be essential to the concept of cultural capital, and, if so, whether they necessarily take a “highbrow” aesthetic form’ (Lareau & Weininger 2003, p.579).
Moreover, in his theory on cultural consumption and social stratification, Bourdieu explicitly drew a link between highbrow cultural participation and cultural capital. Highbrow cultural participation plays the role of indicators of cultural capital and not only by extrapolation. In his book written with Darbel (‘L’Amour de l’Art’, 1969), he exposed a paradox. Art museums are open to everyone; they have opened their doors to the whole society but remain mainly visited by the upper and middle classes. Far from being (only) an economic issue, he interpreted this paradox as illustrating the differential impact of cultural capital that refers first to the cultural knowledge inherited from the family and then to the level of education. Both lead to an individual propensity or disposition to consume cultural goods. Those who have been initiated to highbrow culture (and its institutions) by their family early in their life develop a stronger need for cultural participation. A culturally favourable familial environment provides a set of skills useful to the educational trajectory and hardly delivered by the school. Hence, those who can be seen as ‘initiated’ can count on a ‘cultivated disposition’ thanks to the prime education by their parents.

In ‘Distinction’ (1984), he continued his demonstration of the social nature of tastes and discussed how tastes could not only reflect people’s natural inclinations but also act as social markers. Bourdieu’s theory gives a quite complex picture of the – French – class society showing how social position is built upon different forms of resources, economic, cultural, social, and, eventually, symbolic (i.e. social prestige). He particularly underlined the importance of cultural capital and its different forms in the production and maintenance of social stratification and inequalities. Those brought up in a culturally rich milieu are more likely to develop aesthetic dispositions and to acquire cultural skills through the ‘habitus’ that enable them to secure more easily potentially advantageous degrees. An aesthetic disposition is an ability ‘to “decode” the formal [aesthetic] structure of the cultural work’ (Lizardo, 2008, p. 2). The habitus is an unconscious and systematic mechanism that converts social position into a set of dispositions, skills and attitudes but also affective response to cultural objects, which inform people’s tastes and cultural consumption. Cognitive sociology tells us that part of the role of the habitus would be to perceive and collect raw information from the environment and to transform it into schemata, which are representations of the world people live in at a certain moment in time and can influence people’s action (Lizardo 2004). This constitutes some sort of tacit cultural knowledge that influences the type of resources (or capital) they gain access to or develop (especially in terms of embodied cultural capital).
Using this notion, Bourdieu argues that social space was one-to-one related to the lifestyle space (which includes tastes).

Cultural capital is based on the idea of accumulation of resources but it has been progressively overlooked that this accumulation was, in Bourdieu’s mind, led by different aesthetic principles. Indeed, Bourdieu differentiated tastes according to two main aesthetic principles, the highbrow and the popular aesthetics. They are endorsed by different class fractions defined by specific configurations of cultural, economic and social capital. The highbrow aesthetic echoes a Kantian principle of disinterestedness and pays more attention to the form than to the content of art. It emphasizes the autonomy of art as it should appear detached from everyday life. In the line of the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’, distance, detachment and affective neutralization are core conditions to enjoy art. At the opposite, the popular aesthetic draws on the idea that art should evoke or represent something tangible. Popular art is immediate, concrete and emotionally tainted (and not in a disinterested way). This vision of popular culture which appears as an ‘anti-aesthetic’ (Bennett et al., 2009; Shusterman, 1991) has become quite disputable in the light of an increasing promotion of ‘popular’ aesthetic values, such as playfulness, spectacle, or immediacy (see below).

In the light of this, relying on the notion of embodied cultural capital without acknowledging the links with forms of highbrow culture seems to me makes its content meaningless since highbrow aesthetics is what gives values to people’s cultural resources. However, the content of cultural capital and hence of highbrow culture is likely to be dependent on the historical and national context it is developed in (Lareau & Weininger 2003, p.579). What actually does ‘highbrow culture’ mean in our current cultural context which is arguably ‘more omnivorous’?

The Omnivore: A real challenger?

The figure of the ‘cultural omnivore’ has most famously challenged the irreducible tensions between highbrow and popular culture. In the ‘90s Peterson and his colleagues observed that a growing part of the population, although mainly from the middle and upper classes, tended to appreciate both high and low forms of culture (Peterson & Kern 1996; Peterson & Simkus 1992). The idea is simple: the distinction which opposes high culture to low culture has been progressively losing its relevance in favour of one differentiating omnivores and univores. The very principle of homology is placed in question by the fact that while upper social strata
have more chances of liking high culture they also enjoy more popular cultural forms. The lower social strata are thus considered as ‘univores’, investing themselves in a narrower range of activities. Interestingly, one could interpret this movement from snob to omnivore as the progressive disappearance of a certain kind of univore, defined by a disposition towards high culture. The rise of the omnivore is due, according to Peterson (2005), to structural and cultural social changes, such as social mobility (van Eijck 1999; Friedman 2012) or the aestheticization of popular culture (notably by the media).

The idea of omnivorousness has received a lot of attention in the sociological literature. While at first sight omnivorousness may have been the sign of some sort of cultural democracy, most studies revealed that it doesn’t actually question the pertinence of mechanisms of cultural distinction and legitimacy put forward by Bourdieu. Instead, it revises how they operate (on which values). In what follows I have summarized what I conceive to be the three main lines of arguments of revision.

*Omnivorous: how to draw and cross boundaries at the same time*

Research has shown the extent to which omnivorousness is a socially stratified phenomenon. It constitutes a ‘boundary-drawing mechanism’ (Lizardo & Skiles 2013) differentiating both horizontally and vertically social groups and their cultural referents. Omnivorousness has been defined as a feature of younger highly educated people (Peterson & Kern 1996; López-Sintas & García-Álvarez 2002). However, the nature of the relation between omnivorousness and age appears more complex than the straightforward one with education. Peterson more recently revealed that younger cohorts were nowadays less likely to enjoy high culture (Peterson 2005; Rossman & Peterson 2005; Peterson & Rossman 2008), suggesting a sort of de-intellectualization or a popularization of cultural referents. Drawing on the terminology of Warde & Gayo-Cal (2009), one can say that they are increasingly likely to be omnivores by volume (in the number of tastes and activities favoured) rather than by composition (a variety of tastes and practices characterized by diverse legitimacy). Warde and Gayo-Cal (2009) indicated that it was not necessarily younger people who were the most omnivorous but the middle-aged ones. This is in line with Donnat’s group of ‘Branchès’ (2004) (which could be translated as ‘connected’), a group in middle age characterized by broad cultural resources. Those of middle-age have had greater exposure to diverse social contexts and have taken on board a greater diversity of cultural referents.
It has also been argued that there are various ways of being ‘open to diversity’ to paraphrase Ollivier (2008; Bellavance 2008). Mixing political, cultural and social dimensions, Fridman and Ollivier (2004) even spoke of ‘an ostentatious openness to diversity’, showing that tolerance was a part of the character of those with a wide range of social, economic and cultural resources. Their approach has the benefit of indicating that omnivorousness is more than a range of tastes but also as a ‘discriminating attitude’ (Warde et al. 2008). It re-affirms the link between omnivorousness and cultural capital and distinction (Bryson 1996).

Hence, the concept has not been consistently interpreted due in part to many different operationalisations (Robette & Roueff 2014; Karademir Hazır & Warde 2016). Yet, omnivorousness is always related to essential social divisions. In all of these cases, the distinctive value of omnivorousness comes from the fact that the omnivores have the skills to draw boundaries between them and others. More importantly, they achieve their special status by actually picking into the cultural repertoires of other lower social groups and mixing them with their own in a very specific way (which is, to be fair, in line with Peterson’s original conceptualization, 2005). In other words, to draw these new social boundaries and to acquire some distinctiveness, omnivores need cultural boundaries to be transgressed and crossed. Omnivorousness is a mechanism that feeds on the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture but also that between younger and older forms of culture rather than destroying them (see Bellavance 2008).

A more inclusive highbrow culture?

Omnivorousness requires the maintenance of cultural hierarchies but these hierarchies may change over time. A few studies have envisaged that the content of highbrow culture could have changed over time and become more open to a diversity of cultural referents. Different authors have discussed the extent to which the aesthetic criteria we rely on are the product of a historical moment. DiMaggio (1982b), for instance, outlined the role of new urban elites in the institutionalization of highbrow culture in Boston at that time. Levine (1990) explained further how the very notion of ‘highbrow culture’ emerged at the end of the 19th century in the United States as the result of different transformations in the spheres of cultural production and hence of cultural consumption (autonomization and sacralization of culture, opposition to any mixing of genres, depreciation of popular forms of culture, distanciation from an unknowledgeable audience, etc.). These processes were related to the emergence of
new fractions of class who used their cultural capital to affirm their social position. An important point though is that Levine never denied the role of aesthetics in these changes but contended that aesthetics couldn’t explain alone changes in behaviours and attitudes and in the institutional settings that went along with the establishment of high culture (p. 228). This illustrates the fragile and dynamic nature of the aesthetic and cultural classifications we use – even when they have been supported by longstanding institutions.

As argued in my own work (Hanquinet et al. 2014), Bourdieu’s definition of highbrow culture is context-dependent. It draws on an implicitly modernist aesthetic and, as Prior argued (Prior 2005), his account of art perception should be updated to account for new postmodern cultural values (e.g. entertainment or distraction). Modernism has challenged the traditional characteristics of works of art, such as representation, harmony and beauty, and artistic skills, endorsed the ‘Art-for-the-art’s sake’ principle valuing detachment in arts consumption and stressed the autonomy of works of art. Although this paradigm is still influential, new ones have emerged. In particular postmodernism questions the gap between the commercial and popular on the one hand and the highbrow on the other and promotes a ‘playful’ aesthetic based on transgression and experimentation (Featherstone 1991). It also seeks to reduce the boundaries between life and art, enabling more participative, inclusive and immediate forms of art and culture. This has modified the content one should give to highbrow culture as it can include both classical and ‘emerging’ cultural referents. Our research argues that these new aesthetic values – socially valued – can explain the development of recent distinctive aesthetic preferences, such as one that valorises a socially reflexive art compared to art detached from social concerns. As a direct and major consequence, the very conceptualization of embodied cultural capital should now account for the plurality of aesthetic paradigms at play in its formation.

In addition to this, some cultural forms that were traditionally seen as belonging to popular culture are now integrated in apparently more eclectic patterns of taste. Yet, they are also somewhat ‘transformed’ or reified in the process so that they could arguably be perceived as new forms of ‘highbrow’ culture. This consequently creates a hierarchy within cultural genres between the ‘good’ or refined disinterested popular culture versus the ‘bad’ or unsophisticated and commercial popular culture. Johnston and Baumann (2007) sought, for instance, to understand why specific working-class dishes, such as hamburgers, became appraised by specialist food magazines and food critics. They argue that some originally popular food items are transformed in such a way that people need economic and cultural capital to be able
to afford and appreciate them. The burger becomes the ‘gourmet’ burger cooked with Kobe beef or beef from small local farmers that has enjoyed a healthy outdoor lifestyle and; interestingly, this distinction within food items, here the hamburger, or more generally cultural genres necessitates some cultural knowledge and even, they argue, a specific aesthetic disposition to be made. This aesthetic disposition transformed food into works of art (p. 198), capable to extract but also inject aesthetic values into apparently popular items.

Johnston and Baumann purposively didn’t use the term ‘highbrow’ or ‘high’ culture in their text in favour of a distinction between ‘legitimate’ versus ‘illegitimate’. Their issue with the term ‘highbrow culture’ probably comes from the fact that they see it only as being defined by the status of who consume it but this is to forget that highbrow culture was defined by its reliance on a specific aesthetic that can be appreciated by the holders of an aesthetic disposition, which they themselves used. The content of highbrow culture has changed, as explained earlier, in order to reflect historical changes in the field of cultural production (such as the valorisation of popular traits in art, e.g. pop art) and may have a more omnivorous outlook but does not mean that the term highbrow should be simply disregarded as irrelevant anymore. After all, what the food magazines do is to use artistic criteria and aesthetic values to promote some cultural forms as genuine, detached and autonomous art which is the criteria Bourdieu called upon to define highbrow aesthetics.

Distinctive ways to be omnivorous

As we have just seen, omnivorous patterns of consumption rely on the appreciation of ‘highbrow by-products’ of popular culture (such as the gourmet burger). Survey research is not very well-equipped to detect variations of taste within cultural genres. Therefore, omnivores can appear at first sight more diverse in their consumption because surveys have identified groups of people who declare to like ‘pop music’ or ‘rock music’ but haven’t been able most of the time to investigate cultural hierarchies within ‘pop’ or ‘rock’ music (usually because of a lack of space) and to differentiate ‘good’ from bad pop and rock music.

In addition to that, and this is connected to what precedes, the justifications for liking specific artists or cultural items are quite important for understanding what being omnivorous means. Qualitative research indeed showed clearly that there are many ways to be culturally

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3 A similar process was observed for rock music from the early 60s (Regev 1994).
omnivorous and to justify this orientation (Bellavance 2008; Ollivier 2008). In the study of British comedy undertaken at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, Friedman (2011) declared that, when it came to comedy preferences, what people liked might matter less than how they appreciated it (on this see also Holt 1998). He showed that the same cultural product (here a show) could be enjoyed by people with very different sets of cultural resources and may appear quite undistinctive that way. However, people don’t differ by their objectified cultural capital (i.e. their tastes) but by their embodied cultural capital (i.e. their ‘styles of appreciation’). This embodied cultural capital equips people with different – aesthetic – dispositions or ways to appreciate, decode and interpret cultural products or performances. For culturally privileged people, comedy can’t just be funny; it has to be clever, experimental, it has to make you think. For the less culturally privileged, there is a real pleasure in simply laughing and feeling good; comedy shows can be very familiar and rely on elements of the everyday life. Friedman drew a clear parallel here with Bourdieu’s tension between highbrow and popular aesthetic. A disinterested aesthetic perception of comedy reflects a highbrow approach to common cultural genres. Let me finally note that Friedman also recognized the importance of political and moral grounds as criteria used by the culturally rich to assess comedy; this provides further support for the idea of an emergence of postmodern aesthetic criteria which endorse the importance for art to be socially engaged. High cultural capital can therefore not only rely on an appreciation of traditional highbrow culture but include resources to appreciate emerging but socially valued forms of culture.

**Emerging cultural capital**

In what precedes, I have discussed the extent to which omnivorousness should not be considered as evidence for the irrelevance of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural distinction (on this see also Coulangeon & Lemel 2007; Lizardo & Skiles 2016). I have argued more specifically that omnivorousness has actually never challenged the existence of a highbrow culture but reflects the fact that highbrow culture has become more inclusive. Therefore what is socially and aesthetically valorised by those with high cultural capital has been updated to reflect wider cultural and social changes. Omnivorousness appears to be simply the empirical manifestation of this process rather than the cause.

This is in line with a new body of literature around the idea of ‘emerging cultural capital’ (Prieur & Savage 2013). This translates the adhesion to new or, maybe more accurately,
previously scorned values by high-status groups, such as tolerance, fun, inclusion, but also associated cultural products (such as comedy, comic books, popular music, etc.). Prieur and Savage re-affirmed a long-forgotten key aspect of Bourdieu’s theory: its relationality. For them, cultural capital shouldn’t be seen as ‘fixed’ but as ‘floating’ as it mirrors transformations of the cultural field. And to illustrate this argument, they both reflected on her research in Aalborg for Prieur and on the UK’s Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project for Savage. Both research projects present striking similarities. They both show an opposition between those who are widely culturally engaged across a range of specific tastes and practices and those who appear to be much less engaged from a cultural point of view. They argue that this new configuration around the tension between engagement versus disengagement results – among other things - from the decline of traditional highbrow culture but not its disappearance nor the decline of its association with the highly educated. Yet, it has to compete with new socially valued cultural references coming from non-Western cultures, mass culture when reflexively appropriated but also a scientific culture. Of course the widening of people’s cultural repertoires is dependent on resources unevenly distributed among people according to their education and social class but also by other characteristics such as their ethnic origin and their age.

Age has actually become essential in the understanding of the development of new forms of distinction as these emerging forms of cultural capital tend to more strongly associated with younger generations. Bellavance (2008), for instance, designed a ‘theoretical space of cultural items’ based on two dimensions, an opposition between high and low culture and another one differentiating new and old. This creates four key theoretical configurations of tastes, contemporary (high/ new), classic (high/ old), pop (low/ new) and folk (low/ old). This conceptualization supports the argument that highbrow culture is renewing itself as it progressively includes new items and aesthetic criteria. It has become problematic to see highbrow culture as being simply embodied in traditional forms of culture (e.g. disposition to appreciate opera or classical music). An increasing enthusiasm shown to more contemporary, cosmopolitan forms of culture—in line with the postmodernist tendency—participates in the reconfiguration of cultural capital (DiMaggio & Mukhtar 2004). Yet, in order to deepen our understanding of these shifts in the structures and content of cultural capital, refined empirical

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4 See the forthcoming special issue in Poetics called ‘Cultural sociology and new forms of distinction’ edited by Friedman, Savage, Hanquinet and Miles.
analysis able to differentiate process of age, cohort or period effects must be further developed (a good example is Reeves 2016).

Concluding thoughts on cultural capital

Many definitions have been given to cultural capital, as Lamont and Lareau noted already in 1988. This might have made it a ‘catch all’ concept with a fluctuant meaning. This may be due to the fact that Bourdieu himself defined it in various ways across his writings. Yet, with his essay on this very concept in 1979 and key works that developed his social theory of the game of position-taking according to diverse capitals, such as ‘Distinction’, the concept took a clearer shape. Cultural capital in its embodied forms, which is the most difficult to grasp, refers to a set of internalized dispositions that enable people to appreciate artistic and cultural items but also to develop ‘good manners’ in the way they dress, talk and more generally behave. People with high cultural capital appear to have naturally good taste5 which gives them a greater social value and help them to find a better position in the social space. In other words, people with high cultural capital can decode the social world more effectively than those with low cultural capital. Hence, cultural capital has a key role in power struggles between social groups and even more so that it helps to hide structural conditions of inequalities by making the dominated believe that others are naturally more equipped (in terms of intelligence, taste, etc.) to achieve better positions in life. This is what Bourdieu has called ‘symbolic violence’.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show that the concept of omnivorousness never really challenged Bourdieu’s social theory. Empirical research has shown that omnivorous patterns are entangled in new forms of distinction. Cultural refinement might not take the form of elitist cultural snobbishness anymore but that of a cosmopolitan openness; it still represents a way to operate symbolic violence on those - usually from a lower social background - who are defined by a lack of cultural tolerance.

Moreover, and maybe more importantly, omnivorousness never challenged Bourdieu’s aesthetic theory either. Omnivorousness was actually never really developed as a theory

5 On this, Bourdieu actually distinguishes taste as ‘a system of schemes of perception and appreciation’, i.e. embodied forms of cultural capital, and tastes as ‘classified and classifying practices, i.e. distinctive signs’, i.e. objectified forms of cultural capital (1984: 171).
Gayo 2016). It simply coined an empirical manifestation of some changes in the structuration of cultural capital. As any form of capital, cultural capital is characterized by the amount of resources (‘the volume’) and the types of resources (‘the composition’) one has. To account for its composition, Bourdieu used a relative modernist aesthetic framework in which he differentiated highbrow ‘disinterested’ aesthetics from popular ‘familiar’ aesthetics. Bourdieu saw the world in relational terms and could very well envisage that his theory would have to be updated. As Robbins reminded us, ‘Cultural capital does not possess absolute value which is quantifiable. It only possesses value in exchange and the exchange is a social struggle as much as a struggle of cultural value judgment’ (2005, p.23).

On this point, the contribution of those working on ‘emerging forms of cultural capital’ has been essential: they showed that new cultural items and aesthetic criteria have progressively become valorised in the society while being not symbolically accessible to everyone. Yet, these new resources, I have argued, have not seriously questioned the link between cultural capital and highbrow culture but their close examination has demonstrated that there are now different highbrow cultures, which can for instance take a more classic or contemporary outlook. ‘Highbrow’ is also an often undefined term in the sense that many sociologists have simply assumed that is highbrow whatever is appreciated by the upper classes with cultural authority. We should be wary to see ‘highbrow’ as merely defined by the symbolic value given to people who like highbrow culture. My point here that would deserve its own argumentation is that aesthetic and cultural classifications have a force on their own and are historically situated within the development of the semi-autonomous field of artistic and cultural production. Sociologists should avoid adopting a reductive vision of aesthetic principles in which ‘high’ and ‘low’ became robbed of all intrinsic value.

**Implications for cultural policies**

This chapter has shown that the relations between culture and inequalities are complex. This makes the task of policy makers arduous. For long and in many Western countries, the focus of cultural debate has been on cultural democratization, aimed at widening access to Highbrow Culture. ‘The objective of cultural democratization is the aesthetic enlightenment, enhanced dignity, and educational development of the general citizenry’ (Mulcahy 2006, p.234). Highbrow culture was seen as intrinsically beneficial for all and therefore should be
promoted in all the social strata. This objective has never disappeared and is still a central concern of political and research agendas.

However, following repeated findings by cultural participation surveys on the ‘elitist’ nature of cultural audiences, which, *de facto*, challenge the real impact of democratization efforts, other issues have gradually come to the fore and also influenced public policies in this field. For example, the idea of ‘cultural democracy’ has brought out the importance and value of other cultural forms, such as popular cultural expressions. It represents a more active and more participatory dimension of cultural policies than the notion of democratization. As a result, the centrality of highbrow culture in public policies itself has gradually diminished in importance (on this subject, see Chaumier 2010), without, nonetheless, being disregarded. This is in line with the promotion of popular and minorities cultures, which has been sustained by the cultural studies movement for instance.

More recently, the debate about the kind of culture - elitist or popular - that should receive policy makers’ attention has appeared outdated when the increase of eclecticism, visible in the figure of the omnivore, suggests that what matters for well-being is to participate and culturally engage (Miles & Sullivan 2010). Surveys of cultural participation in Europe and in the US have rightly approached culture in a broad and encompassing way and included more and more ‘ordinary’ activities (such as shopping, going out, food consumption, etc.). One of their recurrent and worrying observations is that a rather large group of the population in various European countries is socially isolated since they do not participate in ordinary activities such as going to a bar or to a park, going out to see friends and family or to surf the internet (for instance, in the French-speaking part of Belgium, see Callier & Hanquinet 2012).

However, my exploration of the content of cultural capital also indicates that, as important as the question of cultural engagement is for the issue of social isolation and exclusion, it would be also erroneous to conclude that the tension between highbrow and popular cultural forms has nowadays become irrelevant for policy makers. It cannot simply be assumed that highbrow culture is in decline and is not useful anymore to consider issues of social stratification. Older forms of distinction persist and new ones emerge and those sociologists have labelled ‘omnivores’ are often those who master both forms of distinction. These omnivores do not like ‘everything indiscriminantly’ (Peterson & Kern 1996: 904) and (maybe not consciously but) carefully ‘pick and mix’ what can be socially advantageous for gaining a better position in the social game. They draw on a wide range of cultural items, including
those traditionally defined as popular but don’t consume them as such: either they create their own classifications with popular genres applying their own vision of what is good or bad in them or they justify their appreciation of rather common genres by using distinctive aesthetic rhetorics. New cultural distinctions are particularly interesting as they embrace at first sight authentic, playful or, even, open and cosmopolitan values and are sometimes build in opposition to serious, snobbish and pretentious cultural forms (Johnston and Baumann showed this very well with the gourmet cuisine); they are nevertheless sources of divisions and require socially unevenly resources. A last and most telling example could be the rise of the ‘new screen culture’ to use Olivier Donnat’s term (2016) which creates gaps between generations but also diverse social strata since social media or other blogs, just to name one aspect of it, provide ways to be heard and to be influential for those who have the skills to use them.

Bibliography


